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TRIALS AND TRIUMPHS

OF

Early Methodism in the Great North-West.

By the REV. JOHN SEMMENS.

THE OBJECT IN VIEW.

WHEN Methodism first sought the North-West it was not with the thought of finding employment for an unused energy, or of directing a tronblesome surplus into new channels of expenditure. It was not because the workmen were weary with battle at the front, and desired repose in the solitude of some vast wilderness. The missionaries came, not seeking fame or fortune, ease or safety ; not to feast their eyes on glowing

splendor, or to lay their hands on worldly gain. They expected toil and hardship, opposition and peril, dishonor and, if need be, death.

From the headlands of Lake Superior, the fertile banks of the Kaministiquia, the inlets of the Lake of the Woods, the plains of the Saskatchewan, the frozen lakes of the unknown north land, the altar incense of their consecration ascended. They were bearers of the Divine message of peace and good-will to the rough-visaged and hard-hearted Salteaux of the hill country, the suave and gentle Muskago of the swamp land, the subtle and warlike buffalo hunter of the prairies, the trustworthy and dignified Stoneys of the mountain passes. They came with kindly greeting and proffered friendship, bearing in one hand the dear old Union Jack, in the other the blood-stained banner of the cross. They covenanted with these shy sons of solitude in manly expressive terms suggestive of the spirit of Christ :

"We do not seek your furs or your whitefish, your broad acres or your buffalo ; we only wish to do you good. We ask not your bounty, but your consideration of our message. We cannot bring to you the wealth of the world, for we do not possess it ourselves ; but we offer you the riches of the grace of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Let us be brothers and dwell henceforth in peace together."

So the thoughtful and energetic Evans, the genial and successful Rundle, the earnest and ambitious Mason, the impulsive and accomplished Barnsley, the ingenious and painstaking Brooking, the pious and devoted Hurlburt, the intrepid and heroic McDougall, took up their abode in this great lone land. Representing an aggressive Christianity and an unselfish Redeemer, they opened their commission by heralding a full salvation through faith in Christ to all both far and near.

TRIALS OF FAITH.

In carrying out the purpose of their hearts these pioneers of the wilderness encountered many a difficulty that the most penetrating forecast could hardly have anticipated. In those early days civilization had not sent forward her road building, forest levelling, bridge constructing energies. The advancing armies of settlement and industry had not yet chosen the sites of their cities or established the centres of trade. Supplies of life's necessaries could not be purchased at all in many places. Transport of freight from Ontario would require an ample fortune. Unless the hungry soul

could with faultless aim bring the bird of passage to his feet, or with steady cunning jerk the unwary fish from its native element, or with the spirit of a warrior lay the swift-footed buffalo low, he must suffer the pangs of hunger or perish from the face of the earth.

The inhabitants of the new land at that time were few and their dwelling places far apart. No steamers ploughed the quiet waters. No telegraph lines bore swift messages from friends afar. No iron horse sped across the dreary plains. "Distance," "scarcity," "solitude," were both impressive and oppressive words to the dauntless heralds of the cross.

In the West the effort of erecting a house of abode was only equalled by the more trying difficulty of defending it from ranger, raider and warrior. In the North the work of tracing the hunters to their wigwams in the wild woods was greater than that of imparting instruction when the hiding places had been discovered. Many weary days were spent in snow-shoeing under sub-arctic skies. As many trying nights found the homeless travellers sleeping beneath the stars in fifty degrees of frost.

Lack of knowledge of the native languages made

the use of interpreters an unavoidable necessity. None could read in their own tongue, and but few could understand what was spoken to them.

For many months no word of cheer from friends in the outer world lightened the difficult task or relieved the heart's heaviness. Affliction came and there was no one at hand to soothe the pain of the injured, check the fever of the delirious, or cheer the heart of the sorrowing. Still with unwearying patience and undying hope these unselfish men persevered in the faithful endeavor to enlighten the mind and instruct the will.

Oh, those heroes of the past, who counted not their lives dear unto them! They deserve the honor of a grateful church, for they proved their loyalty by faithfulness unto death.

If there were distresses in the every-day life of the missionaries, far more serious trials of faith were to be found in the moral condition of the Indians themselves. The hereditary deadening influence of the ages had to be met and overcome. Camp-life had resulted in an abnormal development of the sensuous side of the people's nature. Intellectual capacity had to be awakened from a long-indulged stupor before it could be developed and refined. The germs of spiritual life lay dry

and dormant amid the withered leaves of a decaying paganism. Birth was but the imposition of additional burden. Life was the indulgence of every wild fancy. Death was but a sleep and a forgetting. Heaven was plenty without effort.

The whole country was overrun with "rum," and the natives sought it with an avidity consonant with their wild natures. Bigamy with its long train of attendant evils blighted the homes and destroyed the lives of the people.

Poisoning a rival or maiming an enemy was no more thought of than transfixing a sparrow or trampling a prairie flower. The lot of womanhood was one of contempt, dejection and slavery. The term mother carried with it no sweet significance. The marital relation know no special sacredness. The old, the blind, and the sick were burdens to be disposed of by axe or gun, exposure or starvation. Ignorance held the tribes in a superstitious thraldom. Conjurors flaunted their magic power and exerted a baneful influence, until the bravest would not leave the tents at night or course the woods alone. Oh, the crime, the suffering, the wrongs, the shame of the old days, when the workers worked

"And the sun fell
And all the land was dark."

ENCOURAGEMENTS.

The workers did not toil in vain. The Word did not return void. The wilderness and the solitary place was glad for them, and the desert rejoiced and blossomed as the rose. One of the first encouragements which occurred to the observant teacher grew out of the native ability to provide for the wants of the household. While in some sections the best of land was found, in others it was practically worthless. The climate in some localities was excellent, in others not at all favorable to vegetation.

The Indian's natural aversion to manual labor led him to seek his living in stream and forest. Roaming was congenial to him. The possession of property was a weight to the wings of his freedom. Gun and net meant more to him than spade and hoe, yet the wild life of his choice needed a skill and a cunning which were worth transforming. The strength and endurance of the hunter would assert themselves in producing desirable results when consecrated to higher purposes. His poor, blind, heathenish practices, always faithfully and fervently performed, were suggestive of the possibilities in the case when he should know and

reverence a nobler object of worship, and become familiar with worthier methods of service.

Then, there was an evident soul-hunger throughout the land. Many had lost confidence in the old systems and were looking for something better. The best thinkers found no solid ground upon which to build a true manhood, no responsive love answering the deepest cravings of the soul.

It also became apparent that the very solitude, which at first was so undesirable, carried with it helpful elements. Farther south the whites and the natives mingled, much to the hurt of the latter, and to the serious detriment of Christian effort. Here they were removed from all the forces that militate against growth in Christian character.

Forthwith began practical mission work. Houses were built, both homes and schools; a printing press was set up; a written language was invented; tracts were distributed; faithful preaching and fireside visitation were carried forward; instruction in needlework, in gardening, in house-building were freely given; singing classes were started; prayer and class-meetings were organized; sacraments were dispensed. The Christian religion became a part of the individual, and then the

tribal life of the people. Souls were born of God, sanctified by the Spirit.

Common human nature was glorified through the cross of Christ. Sad and lonely by nature, this new-found life made them sociable and joyous. Instead of the quarrels and the raids of pagan times came forgiveness of injuries and mutual forbearance. From the use of a soiled blanket to the putting on of modern apparel was an easy step in advance. Dwellers in birch wigwams rose to be the possessors of log houses. Women, sharing the progressive tendencies of the times, reached the level of equality with their husbands. Home life was developed. The old and the blind received loving care and tender ministering. Wild hunters devoted attention to stock raising and tilling the soil. How often we have heard them praise the Lord for sending them the Gospel, and how our hearts have been cheered to mark the steadfastness in trial, and the hopefulness in sorrow, which now mark the lives of men and women whose fathers were pagans fifty years ago.

Best of all, our people die well. Volumes might be written to show that the Gospel is not only the power of God unto salvation from sin, but also unto victory over death and the grave.

The following extracts are taken from "Mission Life in the North-West," by Rev. J. Semmens:

"When James Evans, the immortal pioneer missionary of this country, began his work of faith at Norway House, William Memotas was a pagan, strong in his beliefs and prejudices. It was a long time before he repented of sin and turned to God; but the change once effected, he became an excellent supporter of the cause he had so long opposed. His conversion was clear. His experience was definite and rich. His influence was great and good. He became a useful and intelligent local preacher, and a faithful and zealous class-leader. He was the happy possessor of an amiable temperament. There was a general sweetness about him which made his presence a delight. His face shone with an immortal radiance. He was an every-day Christian. We never heard of his having committed an inconsistent act during the whole thirty years of his Christian life,

"About nine days before his death, a severe cold settled upon his lungs, which had been diseased for a good while. Never did a weary traveller welcome his bed of rest more than did William the grave. Resigning his family to the care of his heavenly Father, he was fully absorbed by the

prospect of soon entering into life. His pain was great, but his joy was full. To him the valley was not dark. He partook of the Lord's Supper with a few friends. 'My precious Saviour,' he exclaimed, 'I shall soon see him.' Silently, sweetly, he passed through the pearly gates, and was forever freed from earthly toils and pains."

Extracts from a letter from Sandy Harte, son of the Nelson River chief:

NELSON RIVER, *March 15th*, 1883.

"Rev. J. S——, Minister.

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"There is one thing that every man of us regrets that is, we have no teacher with us in these days. It is already three winters since he went away—that is, Edward Pa-pan-e-kiss. But I am thankful to God that we have service regularly still. Our brother, yours and mine, William Isbister, every Sabbath morning takes the people into service in his house, then again in the afternoon, and once more in the evening. In the middle of the week, also, we assemble for prayer at his house. I am very glad to be able to tell you this, for you saw his ways before he was converted. Not at all so does he live now. Like another

man, so I see him. Very much he lives to do that which is good, the work which Jesus told us to do. Through the winter the children were in school also, and William was their teacher. That is the way I see that man, and no other way.

"Another native epistle is from an interpreter, Edward Pa-pan-e-kiss, who served us in the early days of our work. He was converted, I think, in 1873, early in the year; went to Nelson River in 1874 as interpreter and assistant; and at the recall of the first missionary to that country he assumed charge of work, under the supervision of the superintendent of Norway House. His services were dispensed with in 1880, since which time our society has had no recognized agent there.

"This man received his education at Rossville, and was one of the youngest day scholars of the days of James Evans."

"Dear Brother,

* * * * * * *

"You were wishing to know how I am employed. I work for the company, but am not forgetting my religion. I am sorry they took my duties away from me. Very much I want to work for Christ. I keep a class-meeting in my house, and attend the

Sabbath afternoon service up the river at the school-house. When Mr. German is away, I am called upon to conduct services at the village.

"Perhaps you would like to hear of the people of this place. They are striving to walk in the ways of our holy and blessed religion. Many of the young people are turning from their evil ways to God.

"Joseph, my boy, is quite large now. How I wish I could send him to the right kind of a school! He is the only boy I have, and I do want to give him a right education.

"Have heard no word from Nelson River lately. The people there are different from when you were there. Most of them can read in Cree characters. Even old Friday, though late baptized, can read. They are trying to serve God and walk in the ways of righteousness."

A CLOSING TRIBUTE.

While with profound gratitude we attribute all success and all glory to the Great Head of the Church for the wondrous transformation which has come to dear people in whom our Church has taken a hearty interest, yet no true Methodist can ever

afford to forget the honored name of James Evans, the Chairman of the Indian work in the year 1840. His zeal and self-sacrifice were phenomenal. No missionary has travelled so extensively since his time, and few, if any, have been so adapted to the work to which he consecrated his life. He was the inventor of the Evans Syllabic Alphabet, which reduced the Cree language to writing, and which with few variations has been made to express all the languages spoken from the coast line of Labrador to the mouth of the great Mackenzie river. He was greatly beloved.

All honor again to the memory of George McDougall, whose wonderful courage and faith in trial have been the inspiration of multitudes both at home and abroad. His knowledge of Indian character and his influence with the tribes of the Saskatchewan plains were of no small value to the country when Governor Morris was making treaties with a people who would rather shoot than talk.

If to-day settlement is safe in the remote places of the North-West, we owe it in part to the wise advice and the cautious conduct of this godly man at a most critical juncture of the country's history.

He died alone far out on the plain one cold winter's night, the snow his winding sheet, the

wailing winds his requiem, the watchers by his bed the silent stars.

Another name has passed into history, though he is still with us. He will be long and lovingly remembered as the founder of the White work in Winnipeg and the West. His name is as ointment poured forth amongst the prisoners of the first Riel Rebellion, whose cause he championed and whose hearts he cheered with the words of friendship. He it was who stood by the walls of Fort Garry when Scott was shot down by a power unrestrained by the hand of mercy. He rang the bell of welcome when Wolseley, with his brave volunteers, marched down the main street to take the rebel fort.

We shall never forget the Rev. George Young. Long may he live to wear honors so nobly won.

Then there is the famous lecturer and popular author, E. R. Young, the hero of numerous adventures, the narrator of endless stories of dogs, bears and blizzards. Many others not so famous have been equally faithful and successful in active duty at the front. Stringfellow, Ruttan, German, Ross, McLean, Langford, Steinhauer, McLachlan, McHaffie, Nelson, Glass, Somerset. Gaudin and Eves are all men whose footprints on the sands of

Time indicate their life-purpose to walk right, so as to lead others who follow to the "gates of pearl."

Space only admits of the mention of one other, the worthy son of a noble sire, a missionary and the son of a missionary—John McDougall. In the history of the North-West he has on more than one occasion, by skiiful counsel, averted threatened disaster. Many a lone settler in the West owes his safety, and in some cases his life, to this peace-maker of the Saskatchewan. He was the trusted adviser and the skilful guide of Colonel Strange in his campaign against Riel in the second rebellion. He superintended the construction of the barges needed for transport, commanded a party of scouts who reconnoitred the banks of the river, interpreted at all the councils with the natives, and remained a faithful ally until the last shot was fired and the victory was complete.

"Dream not helm and harness only
The sign of valor true,
Peace hath higher tests of manhood
Than battle ever knew."

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